

"Billboard Art" Celebrates Diversity of Northwest Pasadena

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A yearlong exhibition entitled "Northwest Portraits" is being held at the Armory Northwest/965. Month after month, in large outdoor artworks, select Southern California artists are portraying and celebrating the often-overlooked diversity of Northwest Pasadena.

The first of these 13' by 8' "super graphic" ("billboard") artworks hung on the fascia of the Armory Northwest, for all the community to see, is a composite by artist Grace Amemiya that depicts all of the "Northwest Portraits" artists and artworks that will be exhibited. A professional designer for commercial products and motion pictures, Amemiya is also an accomplished fine artist whose works have been exhibited throughout California and who has taught for the Barnsdall Art Center Art Partners in Los Angeles, the Laguna Art Museum Children's Workshop, and *Comision de Femenil* Gifted Children Program at the 2nd Street School in Boyle Heights.

Amemiya is on the board of directors of NewTown, an Altadena-based arts organization that is sponsoring "Northwest Portraits." In their Web site, <http://www.newtownarts.org>, NewTown describes itself as "a dedicated consortium of accomplished professional artists

and artist/administrators—musicians, dancers, film and video makers, and visual artists—all of whom donate their time to ensure new creative opportunities for their colleagues throughout Southern California." Over the last four years, this artist-run, not-for-profit organization has presented a wide variety of arts to over 100,000 people in such diverse venues as streets, plazas, storefronts, parking lots, a swimming pool, a church basement, and even a hiking trail in the San Gabriel Mountains. Bringing art to the people, NewTown has earned grants from The Pasadena Art Alliance, the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, the California Arts Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, other public organizations, and many private donors.

For "Northwest Portraits," NewTown partnered with the Armory Northwest to select by jury ten accomplished artists from throughout Southern California, who are portraying such diverse representatives of the local community as a retired bar owner, a physician in a community clinic, a beauty queen, and a former professional women's ballplayer.

Beginning April 14, the first of the individual artworks will be on display: the billboard-sized reproduction of a digitally enhanced double-

portrait of the local married couple Jim Wright and Bazana Belakosa, by photographic artist Don Repella.

In addition to being an internationally recognized fine artist—with an MFA from the University of Connecticut and a course in photography that he teaches online at Donau Universitat, in Krems, Austria—Repella is known to many locally as the executive director of Pasadena Community Access Corporation, providing Channels 55 and 56 on the Charter Communications cable system and, thus, opportunities for many in the community to express themselves through television.

As archived in his Web site, <http://www.repella.net>, Repella's expressions in photography and videography portray individuals trying (often in vain) to maintain their individuality in our modern mass society. His contribution to "Northwest Portraits" is a good example of this examination of art as communication and sometimes "commodification" (art and people all-too-often at least seemingly for sale).

Repella's portrait of Wright and Belakosa works on two levels. On the personal level, it is a stunning portrait of an intimate relationship: a man and a woman rendered with digital precision as unique individuals—his image brownish, earthy, and outgoing; hers bluish, spiritual, and introspective (Repella confides that both his subjects are quite intelligent, although she lives more in the world of ideas, as a poet).

Further displaying the uniqueness of his subjects, Repella presents quotes in print next to (presumably from) each. Stated next to Belakosa is "We need a more economically strong Northwest Pasadena by creating job and career programs for people 18 to 40 years old"; next to Wright, "Being a creative personality within Pasadena's boundary is a challenging, rewarding and unique experience because of its diverse ethnicities."

Tying these married individuals together is a very warm-colored line between their eyes as well as a background depicting an extreme close-up of the texture of their skin: the portraits are united by the shared memories etched into every last microscopic line that has, as Repella puts it, "transformed their flesh."

Indeed, the phrase "Our memories, transformed flesh" is written explicitly in the digital composition; however, as he has done in many other works, Repella does not spell out his message in English: instead, he communicates his theme in yet another form of communication, the "QR Code"—a machine-readable barcode-like pattern used to mark containers in the shipping industry and often employed in Japan for encoding personal information, as on business cards for quick entry into cell-phone memories.

These digitized, commercialized square patterns—interspersed with inserts of extreme close-ups of such personally identifiable features as fingerprints and palmprints and positioned next to the logo of "Repella Industries" (taking the place of the artist's signature)—lead the viewer

from the realm of a very personal portrait of a marriage to a very impersonal impression of society.

As the eyes of the very solemn couple stare down upon the passersby on the street—conveying a rather "cold, sci-fi" mood and feeling, according to Repella—the observers become the observed: Big Brother (and Sister) are watching you!

As the other two QR codes in his artwork state (in a visual language decipherable only by machine), "We did not notice while our freedoms vanished"; and "We observed everything believing in free will." Indeed, if one examines the fine print beneath the personable quotes, one sees an FBI-like notice (written in English): "Reviewed for Classification by SA [Special Agent, specified by number]."

This contrast of the intimate individuality of a digital portrait with the intimidating dehumanization of a "factory product" is, of course, disturbing but also, in a strange way, reassuring: No matter how "commodified" this communication, the individuality and mutual love of the man and woman portrayed cannot be denied.

That is a message that can resonate throughout our modern mass society and in particular in Northwest Pasadena, all-too-often thought by outsiders to be homogenous and dull but known by residents to be diverse and lively—an idea to be conveyed by a different artist every month for the next year through the larger-than-life "Northwest Portraits" on display at the Armory Northwest for all the world to see.

The Armory Northwest/965 is located at 965 N. Fair Oaks Ave., Pasadena. "Northwest Portraits" are billboard art, hung on the outside of the building; to view the galleries inside, you may visit every Friday through Sunday, from noon to 5 p.m. Admission is free. Free group tours are available with reservations. For more information, call the Armory Center for the Arts, 626-792-5101, or visit their Web site, <http://www.armoryarts.org>.