



Interview with Bekah Unsworth, Public Artist

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IH Ilana Holden

Could you tell me about the opportunity you have with the city of Buckeye to paint a mural for their library?

BU Bekah Unsworth

Yes. So the opportunity is to collaborate with the Friends of the Library and the Downtown branch of the Buckeye Library to create a mural for the programming room.

This one was a really exciting opportunity because the programming room is a room that's used by a lot of members of the community for a lot of different groups.

And so that meant it really needed to be something that was expansive for all ages, and that lots of people could get enjoyment out of for years to come.

It's just been like a really fun collaborative process that I feel like we've gotten a lot of great input from different stakeholders to come up with a really cool design.

IH Ilana Holden

I think it's a very cool design.

Can you tell me about your community engagement?

BU Bekah Unsworth

Yes. So I feel like especially with a location like the library, and specifically the Downtown branch of the library, which is by schools by neighborhoods—it had lots of people coming in and out from the community—it's a community center, a community hub that's been there for decades, and it really needs to reflect the needs and the desires of the community.

Community engagement was just a central part of this process. The first thing we started out with was doing a community survey which was distributed through an online survey, but also through talking to patrons in person at the library and people were able to give their feedback for types of themes they'd like to see for types of books and characters that they really wanted their mural to be inspired by. After all, it's a library mural.

So we have to have books, things like color palette, all sorts of things, and just open-ended feedback. That was a very fruitful process.

Were we able to get a lot of like different themes that people really wanted to see in the mural that I feel like we were able to incorporate very well. And my favorite part, of course was, I also got to include the STEAM class, which is the library's after school class. Where they teach science and art.

And we were able to include the class by teaching them a segment about murals and get some of their feedback and input as well.

IH Ilana Holden

Can you tell me a little bit more about the feedback that you got from the STEAM kids?

BU Bekah Unsworth

So this is again, as I said, my absolute favorite part. They were such a joy to work with. They were so much fun.

What we did with the class was not only "did we go through what are the basics of a mural? What is a mural? What is design?" We actually got to include them and their artwork and their vision in the design process.

All of the students sat down and created art that was based off books and characters that they were inspired by. And then I took that art and as a part of the Community survey, we had people vote on which were their favorites. The top three pieces of art we actually were able to incorporate into the mural.

I did a take on their designs to make it fit within the world of the mural.

And then on top of that, I was able to teach a follow up class in which the kids were able to see the mural. They were able to see the design. They were able to give their feedback, give suggestions for different things they wanted to see in it.

And also, "how do you do scale? How do you grid that sort of thing?"

So it was very fun and rewarding.

IH Ilana Holden

I think you've already answered this, but do you have any other favorite parts about designing this mural?

BU Bekah Unsworth

I will say engaging with the community of Buckeye as a whole, it was such a positive experience.

Everyone was so excited, so thoughtful in their responses. I didn't get any negative interactions at all, just it was a very uplifting and supportive process.

IH Ilana Holden

I heard that you have some secrets that people can hunt for when they look at your mural. Could you share a couple?

BU Bekah Unsworth

Yes. So one of the things that I really wanted to incorporate that was an idea that was given to me by the librarians was to have some sort of like I spy, educational element.

So there are 12 Sonoran Desert animals hidden throughout the mural. Some of them are more obvious than others.

And what I really wanted to do was essentially when you come in, my hope is that you won't be able to find every single one the first time you see it.

I hope you'll have to keep looking. As a little hint, I think the hardest one to find is there's a little scorpion somewhere.

So I think that will be the big hint.

IH Ilana Holden

OK. And what would you say to any artist who wants to create art for the city of Buckeye?

BU Bekah Unsworth

Well, obviously you probably know what's coming: that I think you should absolutely go for it.

Pay attention to the Arts and Culture's website for their calls.

And definitely submit the whole process from the submission. Getting things in to pitching the design, talking to the community, talking to all the different stakeholders, whether that was the Friends of the Library or the Arts and Culture subcommittee. It just has been again, such a positive collaborative experience. I could tell that everyone I spoke to genuinely cares about the community of Buckeye. They're excited to see its growth. They're excited to be a part of what's coming next, and they're really excited to see public art be a big portion of that. And it's just very, very refreshing and exciting to be in a community and to be working for a community like that.

IH Ilana Holden

That is absolutely fantastic.

I want to sharpen the last question just a little bit to people who have never done public art before. If you are an artist who wants to break into public art in Buckeye, what would you advise?

BU Bekah Unsworth

I think a big thing with breaking into public art in Buckeye is again, first of all, paying attention to the calls.

And I think the follow up is when you're paying attention to a call.

I would say think of it almost like whenever you're like in high school and you have your syllabus when you have like the the prompts you know your professor is going to lay out or your teacher's going to lay out a rubric of. "This is what I want to see, really." Pay attention to those things.

And think about, "how does my artistic vision fit into this prompt, into this rubric that they're asking for," not "how can I change myself?"

You still want to bring your unique identity and your unique voice as an artist, but genuinely pay attention to the things they're asking for. For this prompt, of course they wanted to see characters and library book inspired art; they wanted to see collaborative community.

Engagement. So I really focused on how would I bring those things through my creative art style.

So I think that's a really big portion is genuinely thinking.

Explaining those things in your in your application.

And also don't get discouraged as an artist who's submitting things, and I think any artist probably has a body count.

Even higher for me this year I had submitted to 30 different calls before I had one acceptance and I know artists who are even higher artists who have incredible portfolios.

Just know that if you submitted a great application and it didn't get accepted, that's not a loss. That means you have a framework for an application going forward.

You can use bits and pieces of that. That's labor that you've done and genuinely don't give up. Don't get discouraged. Keep submitting. Keep thinking about how you can hone things.

And just go for it.