

## The New Wave of Public Art: Art on the Marquee George Fifield | Art New England | March/April 2016

Unique among New England cities, Boston has seen the emergence of a number of LED screen-based installations, making the city a leader in this novel breed of public art. For the past four years, Boston Cyberarts, my nonprofit, and the Massachusetts Convention Center Authority (MCCA) have collaborated on an ongoing project, *Art on the Marquee*. Together we curate 30-second media works designed for the nearly 80-foot-tall, three-sided, seven-screen LED structure outside of the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center (BCEC) in South Boston.

This is the future of public art, not bronze statues of dead white guys and static plop art, but moving, changing media that reflect the times we live in. It brings the spirit of a city to life. Like it or not, we are immersed in a media environment. In the future, architecture will be clothed in LED skins -- a source for information and art. Interior design and even fashion will, too. A big morning decision might be what video to download on your t-shirt. Public art should reflect this.

Since 2012, we have issued open calls for *Art on the Marquee* to Massachusetts residents four times a year. A student program with neighboring schools and universities has been operating for three years. And we have held a curated round in which new media artists are paired with traditional artists to collaborate on new works. So far, we have collected 124 artworks for the BCEC library from local artists, including 17 from students. These moving images -- followed by the title and name of the artist -- are played on the marquee between convention information.

Whether the artists shoot video, use stop motion or hand draw their work, they embed it into an After Effects template which wraps the media around the three-dimensional shape of the marquee and changes the color in the support columns. The silent artworks vary from abstraction to humorous videos and animations. There are meditative scenes such as Sarah Bliss's of laundry blowing on a clothes-line beside a Scottish stone house, or adrenaline-inducing ones like Lana Z Caplan's *Amuse: Future Teller* and Frank Floyd's *Amusement*, which transforms the marquee into a roller coaster. Corey Corcoran's *Claw* mimics a classic arcade game with its flashing lights and its giant claw reaching for the prize. Michael Lewy presents a dystopian vision of office workers in his *City of Work*. "The most exciting part of the process was seeing my artwork 80 feet tall, it really is an incredible experience," said Lewy.

Other artists are equally excited. Ellen Wetmore, who has created eight works for us, believes the project has helped raise the profile of video and animation artists in the region by making the work so visible and by offering the challenge to create new, noncommercial works. "Its uniquely physical form has inspired me to think about the moving image in a whole new way and led me to create works i never thought possible," she said.

"I see the *Art on the Marquee* program as an entryway for multimedia artists into the world of public art in Boston; an institution that is becoming more progressive, It is pushing public art in Boston in the right direction," said artist Sarah Rushmore. And although it's difficult to know the public's

reaction, the local press has been positive, including *Boston Magazine*, "[These] pieces are truly contemporary and forward-thinking -- an image that can bring interest to the city and state as a generator of new art, a tourist destination, and of course, as a creative place to do business." And the *Boston Globe* said that although Boston still lags when it comes to public art, the video on the marquee is an exception.

The BCEC marquee is just one of a few art-based screens in Boston. Emerson College created the Paramount Urban Screen, curated by Joseph D. Ketner II, for the Paramount building at 559 Washington Street, which houses the Visual and Performing Arts Department. Ketner commissions work from a national pool of artists, including Jim Campbell, Brian Knep and Erwin Redl. In contrast to the sculptural look of *Art on the Marquee*, the Paramount has LED screens in each of the 21 windows, prompting the viewer to look into the building to view the art. Jim Campbell's *Dear John* filled the windows with low-resolution flames, making it look like the building was on fire.

In 2014, at the bottom of Lansdowne Street near Fenway Park, the Mayor's Office of New Urban Mechanics and the Boston Art Commission projected 12, 30-second works on a screen that is 14 feet tall by 48 feet wide. A national company, Orange Barrel, owns the screen and donates 20 percent of screen time for community use.

Boston Cyberarts also has screens at the Boston Harbor Islands Welcome Center on the Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy Greenway. At night, when the doors are closed, two 10-foot by 12-foot LED screens appear. They only have a resolution of 48 by 64 pixels, too low to show videos. But with support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the National Endowment for the Arts, we were able to commission algorithmic artists to write non-repeating programs for the screens. For those who code creatively, there are a slew of computer languages invented specifically for artists. While the work is low resolution and mostly abstract in nature, the artists pulled data from local tide and wind speed, plankton levels in the water, and even bee coloration to inform it. This art reflects the mission of the Boston Harbor Islands National Park.

Boston is blessed to have so many screens that exhibit actual art. Public media art like this enlivens the urban experience while providing a huge presence for artists who otherwise might not be seen. This is a worldwide phenomenon with screens sharing art with advertisements in Europe, Korea and Japan. Boston is on the cutting edge of it.

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